

Trillium Employment Services partners with Peninsula School District to facilitate inclusive work opportunities

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A new partnership between the Peninsula School District and Trillium Employment Services is building a more inclusive community in Gig Harbor for students with disabilities.

A Washington nonprofit organization, Trillium has been helping locate job opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities within their communities since 1983, working in King, Kitsap, Clark and Pierce counties.

The organization has been working in Pierce County for five years and has expanded to the Gig Harbor community and PSD this year, said Alex Blanchard, an employment consultant for Trillium and a Gig Harbor native.

"I just thought it would be such a cool program in Gig Harbor," Blanchard said. "Gig Harbor is such a supportive community."



With previous work experience as a paraeducator for PSD and a sister on the autism spectrum, working with Trillium and in partnership with PSD is a natural fit for Blanchard.

"We really have the idea that any of our students can work," she said. "Everybody has a skill. Everybody has a strength. We just need to figure out how to teach those skills."

Trillium works with PSD's Community Transition Program (CTP), which provides education, training and support for students age 18 to 21 with intellectual disabilities as they transition from school to the community.

The CTP program is individualized for each student with the goal to help each student achieve the highest level of independence that is possible for them, explained Kelsey Wessinger, a CTP teacher.

"We look at their strengths and skills and try and guide them to their job choices," Wessinger said.

There are four CTP students from Gig Harbor in the School to Work program who will be working with Trillium this year to find employment.

School to Work was created to bridge the gap from children services to adult services, Blanchard explained.

"It's a way that the whole support team can stay together," she said.

The School to Work program takes place over the last three years of the student's academic years, transitioning from a school focus to a community focus to teach skills for adult living and independence, said Kelli Talent, the senior CTP teacher.

"Trillium plays a big part in finding employment for our students and supporting our students," Talent said. "Trillium is meeting us in our classes (and) they're meeting our students in job sites."

CTP helps students gain work experience and build their resumes through volunteer opportunities that students can transfer to employment opportunities as they begin to transition out of the program. These volunteer opportunities include positions in the district — such as a library page at Artondale



Alex Blanchard, left, and Andrew Pickard, right, with Trillium Employment Services, stand for a portrait with students, from left, Silas Barnett, Tyler Caswell, Riley Gibson and Jack O'Brien, at Jimmy Johns in Gig Harbor. Jimmy Johns works with Trillium to employ students with disabilities after they leave school. Trillium has partnered with the Peninsula School District. **Joshua Bessex** jbessex@gateline.com

Elementary or custodial work at both Artondale and Henderson Bay High School — and other positions are in the community, including the Harbor History Museum, Peninsula Paint Company and Minterbrook Oyster Company.

Trillium begins working with these students during their final year in CTP, spending the first several months of the school year performing assessments and meeting with the students to identify their employment goals.

Beginning in January, Blanchard and Andrew Pickard, a senior employment consultant for Trillium, will begin scouting for employment opportunities for their clients within the Gig Harbor community with the goal of securing each student a “job by June.”

“They identify what they want to do, what they think they’d be good at, where their strengths are, and what type of environment they would like,” Pickard said. “Our main goal is to find out what a business needs and then match the skills of our clients to the needs of the business.”

While Trillium is always looking for new employment opportunities for its clients, there are some businesses that stand out as employers for their commitment to a diverse workforce, such as Angie Daniels, franchise owner of the Gig Harbor Jimmy Johns, which received Trillium’s Most Active Advocate Award in November.

Daniels — who co-owns the franchise with Mary Jo Smallman — said that the Trillium clients she employs do most of the same work as the rest of the employees, everything from cleaning the restaurant and helping with the restaurant’s bread process to making sandwiches and working the cash register.

“I think Trillium is such a great organization and company to work with,” Daniels said. “It’s just a great fit for our company to have Trillium clients come and work with us and interact with the community. I think that everyone deserves a chance to be a part of society.”

Incorporating their clients into their work environment is a big goal for Blanchard and Pickard, who note that there is an additional level of support that these employees receive when they’re included in the workplace culture.

“We like our clients to be a part of the culture of the business,” Blanchard said.

Pickard agreed: “They just become part of the family a lot of the time.”

Blanchard also noted that employees with intellectual disabilities are typically very dependable workers with high retention rates, an additional bonus to an employer looking to create an inclusive workforce.

To facilitate community support of these inclusive businesses, Trillium offers “Inclusive Employer” window decals for businesses who employ its clients, along with a place to search for inclusive businesses on their website. After securing employment for its clients, Trillium continues to provide support to make sure things are running smoothly and help solve any issues that might arise.

Working with Trillium has personal ties not only for Blanchard, but also for Pickard, who has previous experience working with children in summer camps and whose sister-in-law has an intellectual disability.

“I help people with disabilities get jobs, but someone with a disability helped me get my job,” he said. “So it all comes full circle.”